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Educating for a More Public Journalism: Public Journalism and Its Challenges to Journalism Education.

by Tanni Haas

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Educating For A More Public Journalism:

Public Journalism and Its Challenges to Journalism Education

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Abstract

Given the increasing influence of public journalism on the daily routines of newspapers across the United States, students need to be taught how to find a workable balance between consulting and reporting on conventional information sources and consulting and reporting on the perspectives provided by ordinary citizens. In this paper, I discuss ways in which one of the most widely acclaimed public journalism campaigns, the *Akron* (Ohio) *Beacon Journal's* Pulitzer Prize winning race-relations project "A Question of Color," can serve as inspiration for actual journalism pedagogy. I cover this aspect of journalism education (a) from the initial gathering of information, (b) through the actual writing of stories, (c) to the final evaluation of performance. I conclude by urging public journalism-interested educators to consider making citizens and their (lack of) involvement in public life one of the central subjects of concern in the classroom.

Introduction

Advocates of public journalism widely agree that this conception of journalism differs markedly from conventional journalism. Not only do the underlying goals of public journalism differ from conventional journalism, but the actual way journalism is practiced contrasts as well. If this is indeed the case - as I believe it is - then one would expect public journalism scholars to be debating, among other issues, the type of formal education and training required for students to become competent public journalists. Surprisingly, this has not been the case. Besides Arthur Charity's (1995a) *Doing Public Journalism: A Teacher's Guide*, only a few practical recommendations for journalism educators (e.g., Eksterowicz, Roberts, & Clark, 1998; Merritt, 1998), and two related essays on education for community-focused journalism (e.g., Killenberg & Dardenne, 1997; Lambeth & Aucoin, 1993), have been published; to date, no sustained debate on the important topic of public journalism and journalism education has occurred. This is all the more surprising, and unfortunate considering that courses in public journalism increasingly are being offered at colleges and universities across the United States (see Gibbs, 1997).

In this paper, I hope to stimulate a debate on public journalism education by reflecting on some challenges the practice of public journalism poses to the education of undergraduate and graduate journalism students. In contrast to Eksterowicz, Roberts, & Clark (1998) and Merritt (1998), who recommend that conventional skills courses either be supplemented by (e.g., Eksterowicz, Roberts, & Clark, p. 89) or substituted for (e.g., Merritt, p. 144) courses in the social sciences and humanities, I consider how existing skills courses could usefully be modified in light of recent trends in the practice of public journalism. The argument I advance is this: Given the increasing influence of public journalism on the daily routines of newspapers across the United States, students need to be taught how to find a workable balance between consulting

and reporting on conventional information sources and consulting and reporting on the perspectives provided by ordinary citizens. Toward that end, in this paper I discuss ways in which one of the most widely acclaimed public journalism campaigns, the *Akron* (Ohio) *Beacon Journal's* Pulitzer Prize winning race-relations project "A Question of Color," can serve as inspiration for actual journalism pedagogy. While the "Question of Color" campaign serves as the central, organizing case study, I draw parallels to other, more recent journalistic initiatives, notably those that manifest current trends of incorporating various public journalism practices within daily news gathering and writing routines.

I begin by briefly reviewing some central tenets of public journalism. Next, I discuss how journalism educators can help students prepare for the practice of public journalism by considering the journalistic process (a) from the initial gathering of information, (b) through the actual writing of stories, (c) to the final evaluation of performance. I conclude by urging public journalism-interested educators to consider making citizens and their (lack of) involvement in public life one of the central subjects of concern in the classroom.

The Theory and Practice of Public Journalism

Widely associated with the theoretical work of *New York University* Professor Jay Rosen and the self-reflexive writings of former *Wichita* (Kansas) *Eagle* Editor Davis Merritt, the emergence of public journalism in the late 1980's and early 1990's may perhaps best be explained as a reaction to perceived flaws in the practice of conventional journalism (see Merritt, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 1998; Rosen & Merritt, 1994; Rosen, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Rosen & Merritt, 1998). Central to a public conception of journalism is the argument that the primary political responsibility of journalists is to help increase civic

commitment to and citizen participation in democratic processes. In Rosen's (1993) words, to be "public" in their orientation, journalists must "play an active role in supporting civic involvement, improving discourse and debate, and creating a climate in which the affairs of the community" can be aired and deliberated (p. 3). This requires, in turn, that journalists abandon their current preoccupation with "government as the *actor* to which [they] need to be attentive [and] people as the *acted on*, who [they] might occasionally ask to comment but who otherwise have no role" to play (Merritt, 1998, p. 77, emphasis added). Journalists should, as Rosen (1994) argues, "focus on citizens as *actors within* rather than *spectators to*" democratic processes (p. 376, emphasis added, cf. Carey, 1987) by helping them articulate what has been referred to variously as the "citizen's agenda," the "public agenda," and the "people's agenda."

Following Rosen's corpus of theory explanations, in particular his contribution to Lambeth, Meyer, & Thorson's (1998) *Assessing Public Journalism* anthology (Rosen, 1998, p. 46; see also 1999a, 1999b), I take public journalism to consist of three dimensions simultaneously; public journalism is: (a) "an argument about the proper task of the press," which is a topic that has been covered widely in the scholarly literature (cf. Glasser, 1999a; Haas, 1999; Rosen, 1999a); (b) "a set of practices – experiments … that are slowly spreading through American journalism," which are topics that have gained proportionally little discussion and which I seek to address in this paper; and (c) "a movement of people and institutions," supported by various organizations, notably the *American Press Institute*, the *Kettering Foundation*, the *Knight Foundation*, the *Pew Center for Civic Journalism*, the *Poynter Institute for Media Studies*, and the *Project on Public Life and the Press*.

In addition to such grounded theory definitions, public journalism can be defined by example. Since 1988, when the first public journalism campaign – as such - was launched by the

Columbus (Georgia) *Ledger-Enquirer* (Rosen, 1991), more than 300 public journalism campaigns have been conducted across the United States (Austin, 1997). While these campaigns have included work done across news media - newspapers, television, radio, and the Internet, either separately or collaboratively (see Denton & Thorson, 1998; Thorson & Lambeth, 1995; Thorson, Ognianova, Coyle, & Lambeth, 1998) - the majority of campaigns have been confined to small and medium-sized newspapers (Merritt & Rosen, 1998). The public journalism campaigns conducted thus far can be categorized in two ways. They either (a) have sought to expand the scope of election coverage beyond candidates and the issues they consider important, or (b) have based the daily coverage of politics in the issues and perspectives of ordinary citizens.

During the past couple of years, the practice of public journalism has moved beyond project-based initiatives by primarily small and medium-sized newspapers. Recent national studies show not only that the vast majority of journalists approve of many of the goals of public journalism (see Voakes, 1999), but also that more than 60% of daily newspapers of all sizes are currently incorporating various public journalism practices within their daily news gathering and writing routines (see Arant & Meyer, 1998). Such public journalism practices include extensive surveys aimed at identifying issues of concern to ordinary citizens, news coverage written from the perspectives of ordinary citizens rather than governmental actors and institutions, and follow-up interviews with ordinary citizens to determine whether news coverage adequately reflected their concerns. Cunningham (1999; see also Schaffer, 2000) reports that even some of public journalism's historically most vocal critics, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* (see Bare, 1998; Glasser, 1999b; Rosen 1999a, 1999b), have begun to experiment with various public journalism practices, notably in their coverage of the 2000 local and national elections.

The Challenges "of" and "to" Public Journalism

Before addressing some challenges the practice of public journalism poses "to" journalism education, I briefly consider some challenges "of" teaching public journalism. Since its emergence about a decade ago, public journalism has generated heated debate among journalism and mass communication scholars and practicing journalists alike. While a growing number of scholars and journalists endorse public journalism, arguing that this conception of journalism might facilitate increased voter participation during political elections in particular and civic participation in local community affairs more generally, many others remain highly critical. If indeed valid, some of those criticisms would cast into question the very viability of practicing and, by implication, teaching public journalism.

Many prominent journalism and mass communication scholars have criticized public journalism. While I cannot address the full scope of those criticisms here (see Black, 1997; Glasser, 1999a, Rosen, 1999a for review), some of the most widely expressed criticisms should be mentioned. First, several scholars have argued that public journalism is a communitarian movement which requires journalists to concede editorial autonomy to citizens in pursuit of community consensus (see Barney, 1996, 1997; Corrigan, 1999; Merrill, 1997; Merrill, Gade, & Blevens, in press; Parisi, 1997). Second, several scholars have argued that public journalism fails to contend with the increasing commercialization of news media and its profound impact on how journalism is practiced (see Frank, 1998; Glasser & Craft, 1998; Hackett & Zhao, 1996, 1998; Hardt, 1997, 1999; Martin, in press; McChesney, 1999; Schudson, 1998, 1999).

Moreover, while many prominent journalists endorse public journalism (see, for example, Charity, 1995b; Fallows, 1996; Iggers, 1998; Janeway, 1999; Merritt, 1998), many others remain highly critical. Again, while I cannot address the full scope of those criticisms here (see Rosen,

1996, 1999a; Coleman, 1997 for review), some of the most widely expressed criticisms should be mentioned. Public journalism has been criticized for crossing the line between detachment and advocacy (see Gartner, 1995; Raines, 1996; Woo, 1995), and thereby for making it difficult for journalists to independently cover the news for fear of upsetting prevailing community sentiments (see Eisner, 1994; Frankel, 1995; Kelly, 1996). As such, public journalism has been accused of being less of a genuine attempt to reform journalism and more of a marketing or public relations strategy aimed at increasing audience ratings (see Krimsky, 1995; Remnick, 1996; Tharp, 1996).

If indeed valid, these criticisms would cast into question the very viability of practicing and, by implication, teaching public journalism. First, if public journalism's primary goal is to promote community consensus, then journalism educators would be forced to encourage students to concede editorial autonomy when confronted by dominant community voices and to disregard marginalized ones. Moreover, if the commercial context of news media offers journalists little room to maneuver, then public journalism education would at best make no difference at all. At worst, such education would offer students a false sense of autonomy.

These criticisms are, however, only partly valid. First, while public journalism encourages journalists to focus attention on issues of concern to the community, it does not require journalists to favor dominant community voices over marginalized ones. Rather, as Charity (1995b) argues, public journalism encourages journalists to take "the views of every segment of the community into account" (p. 66). As Lambeth (1998) emphasizes, "in a pluralistic society with contending stakeholders on public issues, [journalists] must cover the competing voices, the associated values ... in ways that maximize the quality of public judgment" (p. 234). Moreover, while public journalism acknowledges the inherent limitations of a commercial news

media system, it encourages journalists to treat audiences as citizens rather than as consumers. As Rosen (1991) notes, public journalism "assumes that journalism could indeed be different ... despite the regime of private ownership, the ideology inherent in a professional outlook, and the general weaknesses of the public sphere" (p. 268). While Rosen (1994) thus acknowledges "journalism's weakness as a public practice housed within a media industry devoted to private gain" (p. 372), he emphasizes that "how the corporate culture of a media company may become more public is a question [of interest] only if [one] assume[s] corporations are, indeed, cultures and not profit centers alone" (1991, p. 274).

Public journalism, then, neither requires journalists to concede editorial autonomy to citizens in pursuit of community consensus, nor to uncritically accept the increasing commercialization of news media. Rather, public journalism encourages journalists to actively promote civic participation among all segments of the community within the confines of a commercial news media system. In this sense, public journalism represents an attempt "to recall journalism to its deepest mission of public service" (Rosen, 1998, p. 48). It contends, as Glasser & Craft (1998) formulate it, that "the purpose of [journalism] is to promote and indeed to improve, and not merely to report on or complain about, public or civic life" (p. 204). Public journalism and, by implication, public journalism education should thus not be perceived as the only alternative to other, competing approaches to journalism and journalism education. Rather, it should be seen as an attempt to orient current and future journalists towards their most fundamental mission: a career in the service of public life. As I progressively describe in the following sections, journalism educators can help students prepare for such a career by teaching them how to actively involve citizens in the journalistic process, from the initial gathering of information, through the actual writing of stories, to the final evaluation of performance.

Gathering Information

Most journalism textbooks on public affairs reporting are divided into chapters that describe the different "beats" students are likely to encounter in the newsroom. This is quite understandable considering that the information gathering procedures of virtually all contemporary news media revolve around certain institutional sources of information, such as city hall, police headquarters, and the school district office (see Bennett, 1996; Cook, 1998; Sigal, 1986). Yet, from a public journalism perspective, this beat system is highly problematic. The emphasis on the beat system implies that journalism educators should encourage students to initiate their investigations of given issues by soliciting the views only of certain authoritative or accredited information sources rather than those of ordinary citizens. As a result, students likely will learn to treat ordinary citizens as "passive spectators" to, rather than "active participants" in, democratic processes – a standpoint antithetical to public journalism.

Among many examples in the public journalism literature of news media challenging conventional information gathering procedures, the *Akron Beacon Journal's* "A Question of Color" campaign stands out as a marquee example. In late February of 1993, the *Akron Beacon Journal* launched a ten-month long public journalism campaign which addressed various issues of racial inequality confronting Akron, a city with a long and torturous history of racial tension between white and black residents. This campaign, which subsequently was awarded the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for public-service journalism, appeared in five installments during 1993.

The *Akron Beacon Journal* used several information gathering tools to identify the issues about which local residents were most concerned and to solicit their particular views on and experiences with those issues. First, the *Akron Beacon Journal* conducted a large-scale telephone survey in collaboration with the University of Akron's Survey Research Center. Among other

questions, respondents were asked which issues they found most pressing and on which they wanted the newspaper to report. As a result of this survey, four issues emerged as important: "housing," "education," "employment," and "crime." Upon learning this information, the *Akron Beacon Journal* contracted two outside moderators to conduct focus group discussions with white and black residents about each of these issues. *The Akron Beacon Journal* then reported at great length on the results of the focus group discussions and otherwise used the views expressed to frame many other articles of the campaign. Finally, the *Akron Beacon Journal* conducted extensive interviews with various experts on racial inequality, including local government officials and university professors, in order to contextualize the views of local residents.

Numerous lessons can be learned from the *Akron Beacon Journal's* "A Question of Color" campaign. Chief among them, perhaps, is that it is possible for a news organization to conduct a well-researched and deeply engaging campaign, on a timely issue, by taking (a) the views of ordinary citizens as a point of departure, and (b) the testimony of conventional information sources as contextual material. The *Akron Beacon Journal* helped create a genuinely "public" debate on racial inequality by encouraging ordinary citizens to set the terms of the debate. Local residents were offered opportunities to articulate their particular views on and experiences with racial inequality and to do so in their own words. Expert testimony was only inserted as background information to illuminate citizen concerns and not to steer the debate in certain predetermined directions.

Many other news organizations, including the *Charlotte* (North Carolina) *Observer*, the *Tallahassee* (Florida) *Democrat*, and the *Wisconsin State Journal*, are currently experimenting with ways of challenging conventional information gathering procedures. One of the most far-reaching initiatives is that of the (South Carolina) *State*. In recent years, the *State* has been

restructuring its newsroom from a conventional "beat" system revolving around institutional sources of information to include multiple "quality circles" (or "quality teams") focusing on specific issues of concern to local residents. The goal of this internal restructuring of the newsroom has been to encourage editors and reporters to cover issues first and governmental actors and institutions only as they affect the concerns of local residents. To retain the focus on issues of concern to local residents, and to solicit their particular views on those issues, editors and reporters meet with local residents on a regular basis to discuss their concerns. (See Johnson, 1998 for an in-depth account of the *State's* internal restructuring of its newsroom).

Teaching Application # 1

Following the example of the *Akron Beacon Journal* and other, more recent efforts to challenge conventional information gathering procedures, journalism educators might fruitfully ask students to conduct a comprehensive survey of the community in which the school is located - or the university community, depending on the feasibility of the population size - to identify the issues about which local residents are most concerned. Upon completion of such a survey, students then could be asked to conduct in-depth interviews with a smaller sample of local residents in order to learn about their particular views on and experiences with those identified issues. Relatedly, journalism educators could divide students into smaller groups responsible for meeting with local residents on a regular basis to discuss their concerns.

Moreover, to help position local residents as "active participants" in the issues under investigation, students could be asked to gather information about how residents themselves would be able to influence the future development of those issues. This would require journalism educators to teach students how to gather what Lemert (1981) calls "mobilizing information;" or

information about what ordinary citizens can do – or believe they can do – to address given issues in practice. One useful assignment could be to ask students to assemble a comprehensive list of local civic groups working on given issues, with the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of persons to contact for further information. The *Wichita Eagle* followed this very approach during its much-cited "People Project: Solving it Ourselves" campaign. For each of the issues covered, the *Wichita Eagle* published a regular column called "Places to Start," with contact information for local civic groups concerned with those issues (see Dykers, 1998; Lambeth, 1998; Merritt, 1998).

By recommending such classroom assignments, I do not mean to imply that students should not learn how to identify and interact in a competent manner with conventional information sources. Clearly, this ought to be a central component of all journalism education. Rather, my central claim is that students should be taught how to find a workable *balance* between conventional information sources and ordinary citizens, so that the views of the former illuminate, rather than dominate, those of the latter. Only then might future practitioners of journalism move beyond the current practice of inserting the views of ordinary citizens primarily as a means of "humanizing" what would otherwise appear as impersonal stories.

Writing Stories

Ever since the telegraph began to be put to commercial use by newspapers in the 1850s, the predominant form for the writing of news stories has been the "inverted pyramid," with its "summary lead" and ordering of content from "most" to "least" important (see Anderson, Dardenne, & Killenberg, 1994; Carey, 1986; Mindich, 1993). While the inverted pyramid has proven to be a cost-efficient means of writing, and indeed selling, news stories (witness the

success of the major newswire services), this form is highly problematic from a public journalism perspective. The inverted pyramid is premised on the idea that news stories consist of discrete or atomistic bits of knowledge that can be ranked in definitive orders of importance. As such, the inverted pyramid serves to position readers as "passive recipients" whose only responsibility is to assimilate the information offered in an "additive" manner instead of assessing the information actively. From a public journalism perspective, no single narrative form should determine the presentation of content. Rather, journalists should use the narrative form or forms most likely to stimulate readers to critically reflect on the issues under investigation and engage others in conversation about those issues. (For different scholarly takes on the relative importance of stimulating "reflection" and "conversation" on the part of readers, see Chaffee & McDevitt, 1999; Glasser & Craft, 1998; Haas, 1999; Peters, 1999; Schroll, 1999).

While public journalism, as Rosen (1997, p. 14) notes, is still in search of a viable "philosophy of framing," there are many examples in the public journalism literature of useful alternative ways of writing news stories. Consider the following two examples from the *Akron Beacon Journal's* "A Question of Color" campaign.

First, in an article exploring potential discriminatory practices within the school system of Akron, the reporters asked the following rhetorical questions after having discussed why white children on average receive higher grades than black children:

> When does a 'C' reflect racism by the professor and when does it simply reflect 'C' work? Who should decide? Who decides what role African cultures played in the evolution of Western civilization? If historians have determined the role was minimal, is it racist to portray it that way? Or is it simply good history? How much does it matter if

all or most of the historians are white? (Kirksey, Jenkins, & Paynter, 1993, p. A14).

Second, in another article exploring potential discriminatory practices within the school system of Akron, the reporters asked the following rhetorical questions after having discussed the pros and cons of racially integrated versus segregated schools:

> What's the best way to educate a minority population? What's the best environment to teach in? What should be taught? Who sets the standards? If they are set and enforced mainly by middle-class white people, does that make them middle-class white standards? Should blacks – especially low-income, urban blacks – be expected to measure up? In a white-dominated society, do they have any choice? (Jenkins, Kirksey, & Paynter, 1993, p. A5).

Framing issues of racial inequality as *open-ended questions* rather than as *closed-ended answers* is noteworthy in at least two important respects. First, by implying that potential discriminatory practices within the school system of Akron are too complex to be approached from a single "authoritative" perspective, such questions might stimulate readers to reflect on the issues involved from multiple perspectives rather than from one specific, racially motivated perspective, such as the "white perspective" or the "black perspective." In this respect, such questions might stimulate readers to engage in what Habermas (1990, 1993) calls "reciprocal perspective-taking" – taking into account the perspectives of other readers rather than elevating one's own perspective to an indisputable standard. Second, the "publicness" of this approach could be seen to lie in the fact that it encourages readers to engage in conversation with others –

preferably of a different race – if they are to develop a more nuanced understanding of the issues involved; this is a strong public journalism-influenced course of citizen-reader action (cf. Schroll, 1999).

One clear measure of the *Akron Beacon Journal's* success in reaching its goals is the fact that 10-15,000 local residents (approximately 10% of the *Akron Beacon Journal's* daily circulation) involved themselves in efforts to fight racial inequality through the newspaper's follow-up campaign, the "Coming Together Project." This campaign gained national attention in 1997 when President Clinton chose Akron as the site for his first town-hall meeting on race and cited the successes of the "Coming Together Project" as the primary reason behind his decision.

Many other news organizations, including the *Dayton* (Ohio) *Daily News*, the *Orange County* (California) *Register*, and the *San Jose Mercury News*, are currently experimenting with alternative ways of writing news stories. One of the most innovative initiatives is that of the *Colorado Springs Gazette*. In recent years, the *Colorado Springs Gazette* has been shifting from conventional "balanced accounts" in which each story contrasts two or more conflicting perspectives to producing multiple stories on given issues, each written from the perspective of certain key publics. This experiment in "civic framing," as Editor Steven Smith calls it, was first implemented in October of 1996 when the *Colorado Springs Gazette* covered an upcoming vote on a proposed increase in property taxes for local public schools. Instead of producing one major story, Steven Smith asked two reporters to write the same story from the perspectives of four different key publics (local residents with children in public schools, teachers, students and recent graduates, and local residents without children in public schools). Each story, which ran on consecutive days leading up to the vote, was prefaced by an editor's note explaining from whose perspective the story was written (See Rosen, 1999a, pp. 118-127 for an in-depth account

of the *Colorado Springs Gazette's* experiments with "civic framing").

Teaching Application # 2

Following the example of the *Akron Beacon Journal* and other, more recent efforts to write news stories in alternative ways, journalism educators might fruitfully ask students to experiment with various narrative forms, in addition to the inverted pyramid, so as to help students elicit the most reflection and conversation on the part of readers. Moreover, journalism educators could ask students to phrase and rephrase questions in order to encourage readers to develop their own views on given issues and possibly even challenge the very "issue definitions" on which given stories are based. Finally, journalism educators could ask students to write multiple versions of the same story, each written from the perspective of certain key publics.

One useful assignment could be to have students gather information for a story, and then require that several versions of the same story be written; one version would be constructed using the inverted pyramid, while others would be written in other narrative forms. Upon completion of these different versions, students could then be asked to share their work with classmates who would comment on which of the different versions compelled them to reflect more critically on the issues involved and, perhaps, also prompt them to want to engage others in conversation about those issues. Moreover, classmates could be asked to elaborate on the kinds of reflection and conversation that different versions of the same story helped elicit. The goal of such an assignment would be to encourage students to experiment with multiple narrative forms as well as to identify the form or forms most likely to elicit critical reflection and conversation on the part of readers.

Evaluating Performance

The conventional journalist's world is relatively insulated. Besides criticism from superiors and the occasional letter-to-the-editor, he or she is unlikely to receive much evaluation of performance from within the newsroom, and even less often from beyond it. Not so for the public journalist. Several public journalism scholars have argued that to make news coverage more "publicly accountable," news media should not only aim to create a public sphere "for" journalism, but also aim to create a public sphere "about" journalism (see Glasser & Bowers, 1999; Glasser & Craft, 1997; Rosen, 1991, 1996). This would, in turn, require news media to stimulate "public discussion on media practices and performance and invite a correspondingly public response from media practitioners" (Glasser & Bowers, 1999, p. 412). In practice, then, the creation of a public sphere "about" journalism requires journalists to offer citizens opportunities to "publicly" criticize news coverage of given issues, and then to "publicly" respond to those criticisms.

Among many examples in the public journalism literature of news media aiming to create a public sphere "about" journalism, the *Akron Beacon Journal's* "A Questions Color" campaign, once again, stands out as a useful case-in-point. By organizing and reporting on focus group discussions with local white and black residents, the *Akron Beacon Journal* encouraged participants to express their views on the newspaper's coverage of white and black crime stories. Complaints settled into three main themes: (a) black men are depicted primarily as criminals, (b) while stories about black criminals often receive front-page coverage, stories about white criminals are often buried inside the newspaper, and (c) while stories about black criminals are often accompanied by pictures, most stories about white criminals carry no pictures (see Chancellor, 1993; Harris, Outlaw, & Paynter, 1993; Holley, Kirksey, & Paynter, 1993; Love,

1993; Outlaw, Harris, & Paynter, 1993).

Near the very end of the "Question of Color" campaign, the editors in charge of the campaign decided to publicly respond to these and other criticisms by inviting 17 of the *Akron Beacon Journal's* editors and reporters - nine of whom were white, eight of whom were black - to participate in focus group discussions about the newspaper's coverage of white and black crime. Each participant was asked to review two months' worth of newspapers (July and August of 1993), paying particular attention to the crime coverage. During one evening in late December of 1993, three focus group discussions were held: one all white, one all black and, later that evening, one comprising all the participants met. In the article reporting on the results of the focus group discussions (see Dyer, 1993), the *Akron Beacon Journal* publicly responded to citizen criticisms by citing in considerable detail the participants' views on this topic and by offering concrete examples of differential coverage. While no reasons were given as to why white and black crime are covered differently, Dale Allen, one of the editors in charge of the campaign, noted the disproportionate number of black editors (4 out of 31) and reporters (22 out of 145) at the newspaper, which could insinuate a reason for the disproportionate coverage.

Many other news organizations, including the *Columbus* (Georgia) *Ledger-Enquirer*, the *Portland* (Maine) *Press-Herald*, and the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, are currently experimenting with ways of creating a public sphere "about" journalism. One of the most committed news organizations is the *Virginian-Pilot*. The *Virginian-Pilot* has made it an integral part of its news operation to offer readers opportunities to publicly criticize coverage of given issues, both on and beyond the news pages, and then to publicly respond to those criticisms. This practice of "public accountability" can be traced back to April of 1995 when Editor Dennis Hartig gave a talk to the local League of Women Voters on how the newspaper would try to position readers as citizens

rather than as spectators. Without revealing this, the League subsequently conducted an informal audit of the *Virginian-Pilot's* public affairs coverage and forwarded a copy of the final report to the newspaper. Editor Cole Campbell responded to the report in a column (see Campbell, 1995) by summarizing its main findings, quoting from passages criticizing the *Virginian-Pilot*, and encouraging more such efforts to hold the newspaper publicly accountable. (See Rosen, 1999a, chapter 4 for an in-depth account of the *Virginian-Pilot's* commitment to "public accountability").

Teaching Application # 3

Once again, following the example of the *Akron Beacon Journal* and other, more recent efforts to create a public sphere "about" journalism, journalism educators might fruitfully ask students to assemble a small group of citizens - perhaps enacted by classmates – who would be responsible for monitoring the student's work throughout the process of researching and writing an article or series of articles. This "citizen's panel" would be empowered to evaluate the student's performance, based on how accurately and comprehensively the student incorporates the views communicated by the citizen's panel and how useful the information included is to them as "citizens." Such evaluation of performance could be presented orally in front of the class and/or as written assignments to be shared with the instructor and the student in question. Upon receiving evaluation of performance, the student in question could be asked to submit a detailed oral and/or written response to the instructor as well as the designated "citizen panel."

By recommending such assignments, I do not mean to imply that journalism educators should have students dictate the form and content of one another's work, nor that students and their respective "citizen panels" should reach consensus on all points. The goal should be, rather,

to encourage students to make their work as "publicly accountable" as possible and to become accustomed to actual publicity in a public journalism sense. This would initiate students into a version of the public dialogue that they, upon graduation, hopefully will bring to fruition in the newsroom.

Teaching "Public Writing"

It is worth noting that there are many similarities between the teaching objectives described here and those recommended by public relations scholars as a means of strengthening public relations education in the United States. In the various reports of the 1998 Commission on Public Relations Education (see VanSlyke Turk & Botan, 1999), the authors suggest, among other issues, that students should be taught how to (a) gather information about an organization's key internal and external publics, (b) develop written materials that reflect the perspectives of the organization while showing sensitivity to those of its publics, and (c) evaluate the extent to which those goals were successfully achieved (see Leuven, 1999; Miller & Kernisky, 1999; Stacks, Botan, & VanSlyke Turk, 1999).

Given the similarities noted above, it would, perhaps, be useful if at least some colleges and universities offered a course on "public writing," to be attended by both journalism and public relations students. The main goals of such a course could be to (a) make students appreciate the wider public context within which their writings are embedded, (b) ensure that the different, and potentially conflicting, perspectives of various publics are adequately represented within students writings, and (c) encourage students to engage members of the publics cited in discussions about whether their particular perspectives were described accurately and comprehensively.

While it would be useful to offer such a course on "public writing," some resistance on the part of public relations educators could be anticipated. Many prominent public relations scholars (see, for example, Falb, 1992; Grunig, 1989; Kruckeberg, 1998) have argued for an increasing disassociation of journalism and public relations education and, more specifically, for moving public relations programs out of schools of journalism and mass communication where most such programs are currently situated (see Fitch-Hauser, Barker, & Barker, 1989).

Conclusion

If journalism is to continue to make a valuable contribution to public life, the primary political responsibility of journalists should be to help increase civic commitment to and public participation in democratic processes. As Carey (1999) among many others has argued, "without journalism there is no democracy, but without democracy there is no journalism either" (p. 51).

One way for journalists to help strengthen the connection between politics and citizens is to engage ordinary citizens more actively in the journalistic process. As I have argued, journalism educators can play an important role in that endeavor by teaching students how to involve citizens, from the initial gathering of information, through the actual writing of stories, to the final evaluation of performance.

More precisely, journalism educators might fruitfully teach students how to (a) gather information on issues of concern to citizens, and learn about their particular views on and experiences with those issues, (b) write stories that stimulate citizens to critically reflect on the issues involved and engage others in conversation about those issues, and (c) offer citizens opportunities to publicly criticize news coverage of given issues, and then to publicly respond to those criticisms.

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